

Organic Certification Questions & Answers

Q: Can I call my fruits or vegetables “organic” if I do not use pesticides?

A: No. Only crops, livestock, etc. that are produced according to the USDA National Organic Program can legally use the term “Organic”. In addition to not using synthetic pesticides, synthetic fertilizers are prohibited as well. A list of approved and prohibited material can be found on the USDA National Organic Program website (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/nop>).

Q: How do I become certified organic?

A: You will first need to contact a Certifying Agent. A certifying agent is a business or organization that has met all USDA requirements and is eligible to determine if operations comply with the National Organic Program requirements. The certifying agent will provide the details to you on how to have your farm certified organic. Generally, you will need a history of pesticides and fertilizers applied to land for the previous 3 years plus a certification plan.

Annual certification inspections are required and certifying agents generally charge fees for their service. A list of certifying agents that work in Georgia can be found at <http://www.kellysolutions.com/ga/organic2/index.asp>.

Q: Who is required to be certified organic?

A: Organic certification is required for operations with gross organic sales greater than \$5,000 annually. Operations with gross sales less than \$5,000 annually can choose to become certified or be classified as an “Exempt” organic producer or handler.

Only operations certified as organic can use the term “certified organic” and the USDA organic logo on their products.

Q: Is there a way I can label my products organic without being certified?

A: Organic producers and handlers (processors) with gross agricultural organic sales less than \$5,000 annually are exempt from the certification requirement but they must comply with all other USDA organic regulations. Exempt organic producers and handlers may use the word “organic,” but cannot use “certified organic” or the USDA organic seal.

Q: What does “exempt organic” mean?

A: An exempt organic producer or handler is someone with less than \$5,000 annual gross agricultural organic sales. Exempt organic producers and handlers must comply with all USDA organic regulations except the certification by a certifying agent. Exempt organic producers and handlers may use the word “organic,” but cannot use “certified organic” or the USDA organic seal.

Q: Is there funding to help me become a certified organic producer or handler?

A: Check with your local Farm Service Agency office to see if any grants or funding is available (www.fsa.usda.gov).

Once you become certified organic, you are eligible to participate in the National Organic Certification Cost Share Program.

Q: What is the National Organic Certification Cost Share Program?

A: All funding for this program is provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the Farm Bill but generally administered by the local state department of agriculture. Certified producers and handlers are eligible to receive reimbursement for 75% of their certification expenses (maximum allowable is \$750). To qualify, producers or handlers must be certified by a USDA accredited certifying agent and the certification expenses must be incurred during the current Federal Fiscal Year (Oct. 1 through Sept. 30). Applicants must complete an application and provide copies showing the amount of certification fees paid. Visit <http://www.agr.georgia.gov/organic-agriculture.aspx> to download an application.

Q: Are there crops or animals that cannot be certified as organic?

A: USDA is in process of adopting regulations on fish (aquaculture) so, currently, there is no mechanism for organic fish production.

Q: Where can I learn more about organic certification?

A: More information and fact sheets are available on the USDA National Organic Program website (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/nop>).